

Montgomery's \$18 million schools 'miracle'

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WHEN THE Montgomery County Council scratched [\\$25 million from spending on county schools](#) last month — cuts that amounted to scarcely 1 percent of the schools' budget — howls of protest were heard. The Board of Education cried foul, and PTAs and the teachers union chimed in, warning parents that classrooms would be devastated, instruction would suffer — even property values would plummet.

Now — presto! — the schools have conjured \$21 million in “savings,” mostly, they say, because hale and hearty employees have suddenly [reduced their health insurance claims](#) by \$15 million to \$18 million.

That raises a question: Will the windfall be directed to the classroom, to avoid planned layoffs of special education instructors, remedial reading teachers and counselors, for instance? No, says the school board (and, more to the point, the teachers union, which really calls the shots — and announced the decision). Instead, much of the money will be used to spare employees from a small hike in their ultra-low health insurance premiums.

Parents of students should be livid. Despite alarmist rhetoric about the threat to instruction, it turns out that school officials are not worried primarily about children. They're more concerned with sustaining a benefit under which most teachers pick up just 5 percent of their health-care costs.

[Council members are furious](#), and with reason. They accuse the schools of padding their \$2 billion budget by hiding the so-called “savings” from the council, which by law controls the county's purse strings. These are serious charges, and they come at a terrible time. A new school superintendent, [Joshua P. Starr](#), takes over the 146,000-student system July 1. He steps into a venomous war of words between the council on the one hand and the school board and the unions on the other.

We're all for healthier teachers, but it begs credulity to pretend the school system has just now discovered the insurance windfall. When we asked union president Doug Prouty why council members were not made aware of the “savings” earlier, he said it was because they failed to ask. To the naked eye, it appears the schools were using their insurance claims budget as a sort of slush fund.

Aggrieved school officials like to complain that they've somehow been mistreated by the council. Never mind that overall spending by the system has increased over the past three years — albeit with state and federal help — even as the council has slashed outlays for libraries, parks, health, transportation, police, and fire and rescue. And never mind that Montgomery's per-pupil spending remains much higher than Fairfax County's.

The schools' sense of entitlement reflects a mind-set formed during a decade of fantastic increases in salaries and benefits lavished on public education by an ambitious superintendent and politicians currying favor with the teachers union. Those benefits, in particular, were unsustainable and are now being rolled back. The County Council, having been burned once, will be within its rights to take an even harder line with the school system next year.